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Building Back Better: Centering Equity and Inclusion in Job Creation and Economic Development

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This is a pivotal moment for the U.S. economy. After record job losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy is slowly recovering: Employment continues to grow and unemployment rates are falling, although these improvements still lag behind for women, especially Black women. Unprecedented levels of public investment from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will help this upward trend continue by creating good middle-class jobs that many workers urgently need. However, most of these IIJA-funded job increases will be in the construction trades, where women and people of color are vastly underrepresented. At this pivotal time in our history – with the largest ever investment in public infrastructure – we must ensure that women and communities of color are included in these economic opportunities.

On Feb. 24, 2022, the Women's Bureau and The Worker Institute at Cornell ILR will launch a webinar series, "Equity in Focus: Job Creation for a Just Society." We will cover current research and programs that address the need for an equitable economic recovery. The first webinar will explore how equity in job creation is defined, with a focus on the current expansion of infrastructure investment.

According to Andrea Flynn, senior director at Insight Center and one of the webinar panelists, equity is eliminating barriers to accessing opportunities. When it comes to employment, equity means equal access to educational and career advancement, and to jobs that provide people with the income needed to take care of their families and improve their economic well-being. Yet, women and people of color are often overrepresented in low-wage, unstable jobs that lack essential benefits. This occupational segregation is one of the biggest barriers to economic equity for women and people of color. Equity will only be achieved with intentional interventions that acknowledge the longstanding marginalization of women and people of

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color within the labor market. Additionally, interventions need to center worker voices, focusing on those who are the most disadvantaged.

There are already real-world examples of successful policies that intentionally address gender and racial disparities within the construction trades, including the Construction Career Pathways policy framework, which will be highlighted in the webinar. This framework is a set of strategies that centers racial and gender equity in job creation. It was developed by 16 public agencies, with significant input from industry and community stakeholders. Raahi Reddy, director of Metro Regional Government's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion program, led the initiative to develop the Career Pathways framework and works closely with various partners, such as Oregon Tradeswomen. The framework boils down to four key strategies:

1. Setting concrete goals to increasing demand for a diverse workforce on publicly funded construction projects.
2. Investing in the recruitment and retention of women and people of color within the construction trades, including anti-harassment and respectful workplaces training.
3. Establishing clear expectations for building trades partners through workforce agreements.
4. Building intentional partnerships through continued collaboration, which includes meeting regularly to evaluate how the work is progressing.

Before the Career Pathways initiative, Oregon Tradeswomen and others had been working on increasing diversity in the construction trades for years, but significant and widespread scaled progress was still far off. Kelly Kupcak, executive director of Oregon Tradeswomen, shared that “the Construction Career Pathways project is unique in that it shifts the way we do this work to shared prosperity model while also tapping into the collective expertise and experience from organizations doing the work on the ground.”

Using examples such as the framework in Portland, now is the time to design and implement policies and programs that will dismantle structural barriers and achieve equity and inclusion in economic development through high-quality jobs access for women and people of color across the United States. The IIJA provides the nation a unique opportunity to do exactly that – to build our labor force back better, benefiting not only the individual workers, but our economy and the nation.

To learn more, join us for the first webinar of our equity in employment series on Thursday, Feb. 24 at 12:30 pm. Register here.

Elyse Shaw is a policy analyst in the Women's Bureau. Follow the bureau on Twitter: @WB_DOL.

Tags: Women's Bureau, working women, Equity, Cornell University, Oregon Tradeswomen, pandemic, COVID-19

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